

Christianity's Dirty Words  
Sermon #2 – "Suffering"  
Jan. 14, 2007  
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Well, I was really expecting a packed house today. I thought we might have to break out extra folding chairs. When you let people know that you're preaching on as uplifting a topic as suffering, you'd expect they would beat down your door to hear it. "Get up, honey, that sermon on suffering is this morning!" I only hope that one of you doesn't say to me on your way out, "You know, Kory, I never knew what suffering was like until I heard you preach today."

"Suffering" has very much become a dirty word in the vocabulary of faith. It casts a negative shadow on the experience of believing. You know how, when you go to visit someone's house for the first time, and they're showing you around, there's always that one room where the door stays shut and they say something like, "Oh, that's just a guest bedroom" or "We use that for storage"? Actually, that room is where they threw all the junk from all the other rooms so the house would look clean. Do you have a room like that in your house?

That's what the concept of suffering is for Christians; it's that part of our faith that we don't want to open up and show to others. Jesus says things like, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it." And we say to our guests, "Um, have you heard the verse about love your neighbor? That's a good one. Let's read that one instead."

But suffering is a key part of the Bible, especially in the New Testament, where the words "suffer" or "suffering" occur 86 times. That's mainly because the people who were reading and hearing the New Testament when it was first being shared knew what suffering was all about. They were experiencing it on a daily basis, and it was much different than our modern definition of suffering.

First of all, we use the word "suffering" today to describe any kind of inconvenience. Webster's defines "suffer" as "to undergo or feel pain or distress." But that definition has been fudged a bit when we read that a basketball team suffered its first loss, or when someone says, "I had to suffer through that 3-hour movie after drinking an extra-large Diet Coke." For us "suffering" is an appropriate description for anything that even slightly threatens our comfortable state of existence.

In fact, you could argue that we've conditioned ourselves to believe that to suffer is an unnecessary interruption of our normal life. We've done our best to eliminate any form of suffering from our lives. We surround ourselves with conveniences and luxuries that minimize the amount of suffering we must endure. We buy chairs that massage and cars with heated seats and flavored coffees until "suffering" no longer has anything to do with "undergoing or feeling pain and distress." "Suffering" becomes sitting on a cold car seat or drinking plain old black coffee or sitting in a chair that does nothing but give you a place to put your fanny. We've diluted the meaning of "suffering." It no longer means "to undergo or feel pain or distress." It now means "to do without an expected luxury or to have our sense of entitlement disrupted."

This is a far cry from what the Bible defines as suffering. While there are many different forms suffering takes in the Bible, there's a common thread that runs through all of them: suffering, as defined in the Bible, occurred as a result of a person's faith. Because Christianity was an underground movement with few supporters and many detractors, believers were often persecuted for their faith in an effort to get them to renounce their faith in Christ. Suffering and persecution were the norm for believers. Peter writes, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."

We have the luxury of the freedom of worship today. We define "suffering for our faith" as getting home late from church and missing kickoff. We here in America have no idea what it means to suffer for our faith. We may at times have felt awkward or uncomfortable because of our faith, but we've never been beaten because of our faith, never lost our homes because of our faith, never fed to the lions because of our faith.

Christians in first century understood that suffering was simply part of proclaiming Christ as their Savior. Because Christ suffered, they too expected to suffer. When Christ tells them to "take up your cross and follow me," he is inviting them into a life of discipleship that will put them in harm's way because of their faith. Like Jesus, his followers will be cursed, spit upon, and killed, simply because of what they believe. We are blessed to never have experienced the biblical meaning of suffering.

That is not to say we haven't suffered. We all have, in one way or another. As spiritual writer Joyce Rupp says, "We are finite human beings living on an earth where natural disasters occur, where genetic conditions exist, where we sometimes make poor or sinful choices, where life does not always work as we had planned and hoped it would." Not everyone suffers the same amount, but no one can go through this life without suffering.

One of the ways the word has been redefined by our culture is the exclusively negative connotation it has been given. Even though suffering is inevitable, no one wants to go through it and a lot of people are on the lookout for someone to blame. I can't tell you how many books are out there that try to address one simple question: Why does God allow suffering? Wouldn't life be more fulfilling if everything was easy and pain-free?

What's happened is we've lost sight of the redeeming qualities of suffering. That may sound like an oxymoron, but listen again to Paul's words: "We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us." At some point, Paul says, we have to move from asking "Why?" to asking, "How?" How can God use this experience to strengthen me? How can God work through this suffering to shape my character and fill me with hope?

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands in times of challenge and controversy." And French priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said, "Our spiritual character is formed as much by what we endure and what is taken from us as it is by our achievements and conscious choices." In other words, we are who we are today not in spite of our suffering, but because of it.

There was a character on "Saturday Night Live" named Stuart Smalley, a self-help coach who's motto was, "I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and doggone it,

people like me!” But the reality of life is that we’re not always good enough, we’re not always smart enough, and doggone it, not everyone is going to like us! It is through our suffering that we recognize our weakness and our need. Our suffering often brings us to our knees, which is where we are most likely to find God.

The worldly definition of suffering leads us to believe that suffering is an end in and of itself. We suffer, we endure, we move on. But the biblical understanding of suffering sees it as a means a greater end. Let’s take the story of Lazarus, for example. Jesus gets word that his good friend Lazarus is very ill. Now, Jesus had it in his power to heal Lazarus instantly, but instead Jesus waits two days before journeying to Lazarus. IN the meantime, Lazarus dies, causing much suffering for his sisters Mary and Martha.

When Jesus finally arrives, the sisters struggle to understand why Jesus didn’t come sooner and spare them this suffering. But Jesus does something even they couldn’t have imagined: he calls Lazarus out of his tomb, resurrecting him from the dead, and Mary and Martha’s sorrow is turned into great joy.

God doesn’t cause our suffering, but I believe God can work through it to bring about resurrection. As Jesus says, “I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.” Through our suffering, God can bring about new life greater than we ever imagined. J.V. Cheney once said, “The soul would have no rainbow had the eyes no tears.”

It is our tendency to dread suffering, to run from it, to avoid it at all costs. But life is simply full of too many troubles to avoid it for very long. In the play “Shadowlands,” about the life of Christian writer C.S. Lewis, Lewis says, “We are like blocks of stone out of which the sculptor carves the forms of men. The blows of the chisel, which hurt us so much, are what make us perfect. The suffering in the world is not the failure of God’s love; it is that love in action.”

Roget’s Thesaurus offers an interesting insight into our understanding of suffering. Here are some of the synonyms it lists for “suffer”: to endure, undergo, put up with, go through. All of those imply movement forward, don’t they? All of them imply that suffering is not an end, that we won’t stay there forever, that God is in the midst of our suffering, working to bring about resurrection. Will we follow the world’s definition and keep asking “Why?” or will we ask “How?” and look for God at work?